

Big Cypress National Preserve Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge

U.S. Department of the Interior

National Park Service

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Public Scoping for Fire Management Plans for Big Cypress National Preserve and Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge

Project Scoping for Environmental Assessment

January 8, 2015

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and federal wildland fire policy, the managers of Big Cypress National Preserve (BICY) and the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR) are joining to develop an environmental assessment (EA) for the proposed updates to their respective Fire Management Plans (FMPs). Because they are adjacent to each other, already coordinate on fire management activities, and have similar resources and issues, the agencies feel that a joint process is more efficient and cost effective than two separate and redundant processes. This EA will facilitate proposed updates and changes in fire management strategies, fire terminology, management of threatened and endangered species, and fuel loading that has occurred since the previous FMPs were approved. This EA process will be employed to gather public input and suggestions for fire management at BICY and FPNWR.

Background

South Florida contains many vegetative and aquatic habitats, some of which are conserved and managed by various federal and state agencies. South Florida contains a dynamic mixture of tropical and temperate plant communities and is home to a diversity of wildlife, including a wide assortment of threatened and endangered animal and plant species. BICY and FPNWR contain mostly fire-dependent habitats, which naturally burned historically with low to moderate burn severity. Fire-dependent communities, such as BICY and FPNWR, are those where fire is essential for species to reproduce and grow. Pinelands and prairies burned every 2–10 years without fire management or human intervention. Other habitats may have experienced longer burn intervals.

BICY was created by Congress in 1974 and expanded in 1988 (Addition lands) to protect the watershed values of the Big Cypress Swamp while integrating multiple human uses with



conservation and preservation. It consists of 729,000 acres of extensive prairies and marshes, forested swamps, pinelands, hardwood hammocks, and shallow sloughs.

Scattered throughout the Preserve are a number of Native American villages and home sites, single-family dwellings and backcountry camps (1,500 structures), visitor facilities, an airport, canals, highways, off-road vehicle trails, power lines and other infrastructure. Eligible and proposed wilderness have been

identified in BICY and will be managed to preserve wilderness character until Congress makes a decision regarding the designation of wilderness in the Preserve.

The current BICY FMP may be found at <http://www.nps.gov/bicy/naturescience/fire-management-plan.htm>.

FPNWR was established in 1989 when the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service purchased 24,300 acres from the Collier family to facilitate the recovery of the endangered Florida panther. FPNWR is currently 26,400 acres and is characterized by mixed forest, cypress, sub-tropical hardwood hammocks, slash pine, saw palmetto, and wet prairies and sloughs. FPNWR habitats support the greatest number of native orchids in North America. While FPNWR focuses on maintaining habitat and prey for the Florida panther, it also protects other wildlife and other threatened and endangered species. To minimize disturbance to the Florida panther and other wildlife, FPNWR is mostly closed to the public with only two hiking trails and an annual open house event.



The current FPNWR FMP may be found under “Planning for the Future” at http://www.fws.gov/refuge/florida_panther/.

Until the new FMPs are completed, BICY/FPNWR will continue to suppress wildfires and engage in vegetation management activities as allowed under their current management plans, subject to the need to protect newly listed threatened and endangered species. Updated FMPs are needed by BICY/FPNWR to refine strategies that may help increase the annual acreage treated by fire, to restore fire-dependent communities and related threatened and endangered species, and to incorporate updates in national fire policy and terminology. In their new FMPs, BICY and the FPNWR are considering proactive strategies to more actively manage vegetation and wildland fire.

Fire Management Goals

BICY/FPNWR plan to follow the listed broad goals as they develop their new FMPs.

- 1. Ensure that firefighter and public safety are the first**

priority in all fire management activities.

2. **Facilitate the protection of private property, infrastructure and federal facilities, critical transportation corridors, recreational values, and other special values within and adjacent to BICY/FPNWR.**
3. **Enhance the protection of natural and cultural resources with fire management activities. This includes taking actions related to:**
 - **Protecting and enhancing threatened and endangered species and their habitats, migratory birds, and eligible and proposed wilderness;**
 - **Perpetuating, restoring, replacing, or replicating natural processes when practical to sustain a healthy ecosystem; and**
 - **Preventing the further invasion and spread of non-native plants.**
4. **Use wildland fire response strategies, prescribed fire, and vegetation management activities where and when appropriate to reduce hazardous fuels and meet BICY/FPNWR natural resource objectives.**
5. **Encourage and support monitoring and research to advance the understanding of local fire behavior, effects, ecology, and fire management, and use adaptive management to update and improve fire management activities.**
6. **Promote public education and understanding of fire processes and management.**
7. **Conduct fire management activities in an efficient, cost effective manner and ensuring progress toward BICY/FPNWR management goals and objectives.**
8. **Promote an interagency ecosystem approach for fire management activities that includes federal, tribal, state, and local agencies.**

BICY and FPNWR plan to develop and maintain separate but coordinated FMPs, and each may adopt specific objectives related to the above listed goals. For example, BICY may develop fire management objectives related to minimum tool and equipment use in eligible and proposed wilderness, while FPNWR may develop vegetation management objectives that encourage growth and reproduction of prey species for the endangered Florida panther.

Planning Process

Internal scoping by National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service specialists and staff started the EA process on October 22, 2014. This EA will be prepared in compliance with NEPA to provide the decision-making framework that 1) explores management alternatives to meet BICY/FPNWR objectives, 2) evaluates potential impacts to BICY/FPNWR resources and values, and 3) identifies mitigation measures to minimize the degree of these impacts.

At a minimum, the EA will evaluate a “No Action Alternative” (i.e., continue current management) and one

“Proposed Action Alternative”. Additional alternatives or changes to these alternatives could result from public comments. The initial draft alternatives are described below.

The “No Action Alternative” would continue the fire management activities that are presently occurring in BICY and FPNWR under their current FMPs. Both units would continue using the strategies in their current FMPs, which include fire suppression, prescribed burning, use of some mechanical equipment, and spot treatment of invasive vegetation by herbicide.

Possible attendant negative effects could include continued accumulations of hazardous fuels and the associated risk to human structures and values; lack of an adequate amount of burning may impact recovery and maintenance of fire-adapted plant and wildlife communities. Lack of FMP focus on values important to newly listed threatened and endangered species may also reduce total acreage treated by fire.

The “Proposed Action Alternative” would allow the use of a full range of fire management tools/strategies for fire and vegetation management. These would include wildfire suppression, prescribed burning, limited use of mechanical equipment, spot treatment of invasive vegetation by herbicide, and wildfire managed for resource objectives. The FMPs would incorporate updates in national fire policy and terminology. Strategies, mitigations, and processes to deal with newly listed threatened and endangered species, and proposed and eligible Wilderness would be included in the FMPs. BICY and FPNWR may develop specific and different fire management objectives in their FMPs related to their agency missions and unit goals.



What is “wildfire managed for resource objectives”?

These are wildfires ignited by lightning that may be managed, or allowed to burn, in certain areas under certain conditions. To be able to use this management strategy, agencies must include this strategy in their FMPs, provide for firefighter and public safety, address values to be protected and public health issues, be consistent with BICY and FPNWR resource management objectives and area activities, and follow environmental laws and regulations. The goal of wildfires managed for resource objectives is to utilize fire as a process to help restore and maintain fire-dependent plant and wildlife communities, to reduce hazard fuels, and to decrease the chance for widespread, uncharacteristically severe wildfires that may impact human and natural values.

Mitigation tactics will be developed as part of this EA process to minimize the impacts to BICY and FPNWR resources and area human improvements. Examples of potential mitigation activities include defining when/where wildfire for resource objectives is appropriate, measures to protect newly listed threatened and endangered species, strategies to protect the

wildland urban interface, and local public notification procedures for prescribed burns.

All actions would be dependent on future funding. BICY and FPNWR managers believe that well-managed and focused fire and vegetation management programs are vital to the conservation and restoration of these lands and resources, and allowed human uses.

During this planning process, there are two formal opportunities for the public to comment: during this initial public scoping period and following the release of the EA for public review and comment. You are invited to participate in this process by voicing your ideas, suggestions, comments, or concerns related to BICY/FPNWR fire management activities. These comments will be considered during preparation of the EA and before managers make a final decision.

Steps in the Process

The basic steps of the planning process for this project are:

- **Public scoping/input period (January 8 to February 27, 2015)**
- **Public scoping meeting, open house format, January 21, 2015 at 5-7 PM, Big Cypress Swamp Welcome Center**
- Preparation of the EA
- **Public review of the EA (expected late summer 2015)**
- Analysis of public comments on the EA
- Preparation of the decision documents
- Announcement of decisions
- Drafting and approval of the new FMPs

Resources and Concerns

The EA will analyze potential impacts to a number of resources including air quality, water quality/quantity, wetlands, land use and occupancy, plant/animal species of management concern, unique wildlife habitat, non-native/invasive species, recreation resources, visitor experiences, ethnographic resources, socioeconomic effects, other agency/tribal plans/policies, and long-term management of resources.



Ideas to Consider

Listed are a few ideas to consider as you develop comments on this project.

- Are there any missing issues or concerns that should be addressed in the EA?
- Are there other options or information that you think should be considered in the EA?
- Do you have comments and suggestions for BICY and FPNWR to consider in their fire management programs?

How Do I Comment on This Project?

Please submit your comments online at the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment website for both BICY and the FPNWR:

<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/fmp>

You may submit written comments for both BICY and the FPNWR to:

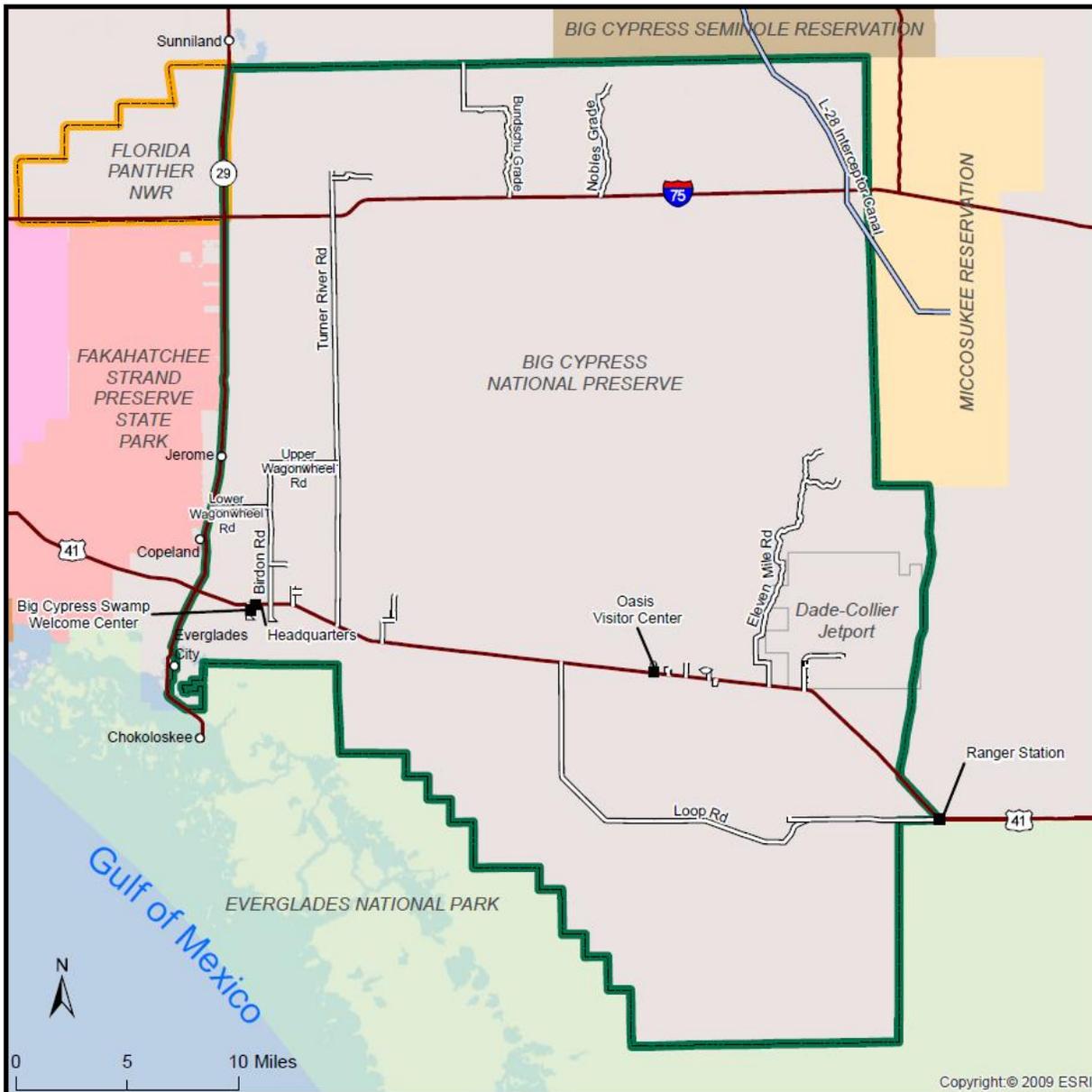
**Superintendent
Big Cypress National Preserve
33100 Tamiami Trail East
Ochopee, FL 34141-1000**

You may also hand-deliver written comments to BICY or FPNWR offices.

All comments must be received by February 27, 2015.

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Boundaries

Big Cypress National Preserve
(~729,000 acres)

Florida Panther NWR
(~26,000 acres)

L-28 Interceptor Canal

Roads

City, Town, or Community

Datum: NAD 83 17N UTM
DSC/January 2015

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